

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/14918.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14918.001.0001)

# **Inventing the Working Parent**

## **Work, Gender, and Feminism in Neoliberal Britain**

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### **Citation:**

*Inventing the Working Parent: Work, Gender, and Feminism in Neoliberal Britain*

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**DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/14918.001.0001**

**ISBN (electronic): 9780262375078**

**Publisher: The MIT Press**

**Published: 2023**



**The MIT Press**

## 5 BECOMING A WORKING PARENT: LABOR INTENSIFICATION AND THE PURSUIT OF “HAVING IT ALL”

In July 1992, D. J. Wilson wrote in to *SHE* magazine to nominate his thirty-two-year-old wife, Kim Wilson, for the Working Mothers Association’s (WMA) Working Mother of the Year award. In his submission to the competition, run by the WMA and sponsored by *SHE*, Mr. Wilson described Mrs. Wilson’s life as a working mother.<sup>1</sup> The Wilson family lived in Swindon, Wiltshire, where Mrs. Wilson was mother to three children—a ten-year-old son and two-year-old twin boys. She also held two jobs as a key-to-disk operator—one for the building society Nationwide, which she did mornings from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., and another for *Reader’s Digest* magazine, which she did from 6:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Wilson had recently taken the morning job in addition to her evening one to supplement the family’s income. The couple employed a nanny to look after the children in the evenings since Mr. Wilson also worked full time in afternoons and evenings as well as overtime on Saturdays “out of financial necessity.”

This arrangement enabled him to take care of the toddlers in the morning and to do some of the housework, but he was quick to report that “Kim still has a fair amount of work to do when she’s not at her paid employment. The work she does at home is her unpaid employment!!” This included, among other things, doing the weekly shopping at the weekend with the three children in tow—“which is difficult enough when both parents are present.” He went on to tell the award committee that although “She does get tired . . . she hardly ever complains. I really wonder sometimes how she keeps going.” He hinted, though that despite her good nature, Mrs. Wilson’s conflicting responsibilities came at an emotional cost: “She is an

exceedingly good mother—although she feels guilty about being at work so much.” After recounting the minutia of the family’s day-to-day schedule, Mr. Wilson concluded on a note of exasperation—“WHO SAID LIFE ISN’T WONDERFUL??” before emphasizing that it was impossible to imagine how Mrs. Wilson could not win the award.

As it turned out, she was shortlisted. When she was invited to write to the WMA about her experience, she spoke about her efforts to ensure that the limited time she had with her family felt like “quality time.” She also offered a brief account of her professional history. After leaving school, she had started work as an office junior in a sales office and had worked her way up to sales administrator by the time her first son was born. When she returned to work after the birth of her twins, she intentionally sought out a job “which did not hold too much responsibility, as I knew it would be hard bringing up two small babies while working.” Mrs. Wilson nonetheless expressed the hope that as the children got older, she would find a more interesting and challenging position “while still maintaining the balance of being a working woman and a devoted mother.”<sup>3</sup>

The account that Mr. Wilson wove about his wife for the benefit of the WMA’s award judges was a story about the heroics of everyday life. While the tone was upbeat, and its emphasis necessarily on the workability of the household’s day-to-day, it was also an account of survival against the odds—one that frequently tipped into the realm of disbelief. The letter ultimately had less to say about Mrs. Wilson’s specific personal attributes than it did about the sheer relentlessness of her day, where work of one sort or another was waiting around every corner. The letter revealed that work, both paid and domestic, was unremitting for Mr. Wilson, too. In her letter, Mrs. Wilson emphasized her efforts to excel—as a mother committed to giving attention to each of family members, as a worker who intended to do stimulating work, and as a woman determined in her efforts to take a weekly Sunday night bath.

In their letters to the WMA’s judges, the Wilsons drew on and developed a genre that had taken shape as a widespread popular discourse about working parents in Britain. By the 1990s, representations of successful, white middle-class working mothers and fathers multiplied in popular culture as never before. From the early 1980s onward, stories about the growth of mothers’ paid work, job-sharing couples, and changing family structures had appeared in print, radio, and TV journalism. The 1990s saw burgeoning

interest in these themes as well as a new media focus on “family-friendly” business and on fatherhood. While feminists had always understood “having it all” as a contradiction, the 1990s saw rising interest in both the promise and pitfalls of the notion.<sup>4</sup> The new genre of confessional journalism that emerged in the 1990s breathed life into these stories and highlighted the ordinary experiences of Britons in the mass media.<sup>5</sup> The 1990s also saw the rise of self-help literature directed at working parents, ranging from profit-making publications to government manuals and corporate HR literature. By 1993, there were more than ten times as many mentions of working parents and working parenthood in published English language books than had been the case just two decades earlier.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of *SHE*, growing popular interest in the figure of the working parent and a booming market for advice for this demographic proved the impetus for the magazine’s reinvention in 1990. Under the new editorial leadership of Linda Kelsey, formerly at *Cosmo*, *SHE* billed itself as a “grown up *Cosmo*”—a glossy monthly aimed at working women with children.<sup>7</sup> Its tagline “a great balance for modern women” hinted at the dual lives of its readers. In her letter to *SHE*, Mrs. Wilson wrote, with a note of humor, that Mr. Wilson was “an avid reader” of the magazine. Devotees of women’s magazines or not, the Wilsons were both immersed in the now widespread language of working parenthood and eager to make sense of their lives and aspirations in those terms.

This chapter considers why a demographic of Britons that extended well beyond the ranks of feminist activists embraced the language of working parenthood, and the forms of self-improvement that attended it, in the 1990s. On the one hand, the Wilsons’ letters, and dozens more like them, spoke to the tremendous reach of second-wave feminism’s message. This included the aim of calling work what is work. Mr. Wilson was quick to name Mrs. Wilson’s domestic responsibilities as “her unpaid employment.” It included, moreover, the message that mothers could aspire to the interesting and challenging work Mrs. Wilson imagined that she would take on as her sons grew older. At the same time, the language of working parenthood that the Wilsons invoked reflected the costs of a world in which work and the trade-offs it required now seemed omnipresent: exhaustion, stress, and guilt. Alongside the work of paid employment and the work of home and family, the Wilsons’ letters point to the heightened forms of self-work that accompanied the rise to cultural prominence of the working parent

in the 1990s. Middle- and aspirationally middle-class parents—particularly but not exclusively mothers—faced a barrage of novel expectations to compound their to-do lists. These included the imperative to achieve equally at work and at home, to attain “balance” through emotional self-regulation and self-care, and, implicitly, to be fully self-reliant, if not as individuals, then certainly as households.

That a growing number of Britons embraced the notion of working parenthood in this context seems at first thought paradoxical. It was, of course, the case that ever-increasing numbers of British parents in the 1990s were, in fact, working parents. Across the board, among two-parent families, 57 percent were dual-wage-earning households by 1989. Despite the greater barriers to participation in paid work for single parents, in 1989, 41 percent of single mothers were also in paid employment.<sup>8</sup> And yet, for a variety of reasons, the language of working parenthood might well have rung hollow. As we have seen, in the late 1980s, British corporations had begun to speak to the needs of working parents and to institute family-friendly policies. To a degree, the national government followed suit. By the 1990s, however, it was becoming clear that in practice neither British corporations nor the national government were delivering on the needs of more than a small minority of working families.<sup>9</sup> In fact, their policies and programs largely served to reinforce the notion that managing workloads, both paid and unpaid, was a question of personal responsibility. Moreover, these policies failed to deliver at precisely the moment when, as we will see, the workloads confronting British families intensified.

It was also the case that the idea of the working parent remained strongly associated with the demographic of predominately white middle-class women who had first advocated for greater support for workers with caring responsibilities in the women’s liberation movement (WLM) of the 1970s. Working-class and ethnic minority Britons, single parents, and men from a wide variety of backgrounds experienced their lives as workers and family members differently from the married white middle-class women around whom notions of working parenthood were now, most often, shaped. Nevertheless, in the 1990s, growing numbers of Britons—including working as well as middle-class men and women far removed from metropolitan feminist networks—came to identify as working parents and to speak about their lives in these terms. A new aspirational culture developed around the figure of the working parent that, to an extent, cut across boundaries of

gender, class, and marital status, though less so race. This chapter explores that culture and returns to the questions of everyday life and the gendered division of labor with which this book began.

## I. A NEW CULTURAL ICON

In the 1990s, the working parent became a cultural icon.<sup>10</sup> To understand why a growing demographic of Britons came to think of themselves as working parents, we must first turn to the proliferation of representations of working parents in British popular culture. As we have seen, by the mid-1980s, the figure of the working parent was evoked across the political spectrum in Britain and with a range of different aims. In the 1990s, feminist charities including New Ways to Work (NWW), the WMA (Parents at Work from 1994 onward), and the Daycare Trust (DCT) called for support on behalf of working parents, instead of working mothers, in the hopes of drawing attention to men's roles as parents and shifting the gendered division of labor. At the same time, they increasingly found that a focus on parents rather than mothers helped them to appeal to corporations and to a state that wished to encourage women's workforce participation while distancing themselves from overtly feminist policies or committing to large expenditures on behalf of families.

In the mid-1990s, organizations such as NWW drew attention to working fathers on a sustained basis for the first time. In 1995, the recently renamed Parents at Work launched a long hours campaign to highlight the conditions of men's work and the consequences of intensifying work culture for family life in Britain.<sup>11</sup> By highlighting the strains on fathers and suggesting that they wished to share more fully in childrearing, the charitable sector made a case that men as much as women needed work benefits such as flexible hours and leave arrangements and access to reliable high-quality childcare. Meanwhile, as working parenthood became a reality for growing numbers of middle-class Britons in the absence of comprehensive forms of state or employer support, working parents also became a major market. If this was a market still overwhelmingly geared toward women, men, too, were targeted by booming private childcare, domestic services, and advice industries.

Amid the profusion of representations of working parents, there was a shared quality to many of the depictions of working parenthood that

circulated in British popular culture. In the 1990s, working parent success stories became a common trope of both journalism and advice literature, albeit in different forms. The popularity of working parent success stories reflects the emergence of shared interests—both political and commercial—in making working parenthood seem manageable and desirable. In the 1990s, the now influential feminist charities that had first popularized the notion of working parenthood were eager to suggest that good lives for working parents were possible, even as they demanded more state and employer support to make this a reality. This dual emphasis on the promise and challenges of working parenthood was taken up in self-help manuals and in women's and parenting magazines, which sought to profit from audiences' wide-ranging hopes and fears about working parenthood. Corporations, whose financial interests now depended upon keeping skilled women in the workforce, were likewise more than happy to emphasize the manageability of combining work and family life in the HR materials they disseminated to their staff.

In some instances, the shared quality of representations of working parents across these diverse media reflected their common origins. To take one example, in 1995, *Practical Parenting* magazine published a long-form article entitled "We Can Work It Out" that featured guidelines on "how to make life as a working parent easier."<sup>12</sup> Although the article was clearly aimed at women readers and adopted all of the style of a women's magazine advice column, it referenced working parents throughout and noted the importance of fathers sharing in household responsibilities. A footnote revealed that the piece had been adapted from another text: the *Working Parents Survival Handbook*, released the same year by the Department of Health's education authority.

The *Working Parents Survival Handbook* was an over two-hundred-page official guide to all aspects of working parenthood addressed to both men and women.<sup>13</sup> The government handbook, in turn, had been written with support from the DCT, the Maternity Alliance, Parents at Work (PAW), and the National Childbirth Trust. The emergence of feminist charities as expert consultants on the subject of working parents in the 1990s exerted an important influence on the images and ideas about working mothers and fathers in wider circulation. This was all the more so given the increasingly strong links among feminist professionals working in the charitable sector, government, business, and media by the 1990s. Not all, or even many, of

the depictions of working parents in British popular culture represented the highest aims of feminist activists. On the contrary, they were at best a reflection of the uneasy accommodation of feminist interests with government and business that we have explored in the previous chapters.

In practice, most representations of working parents in Britain in the 1990s remained depictions of mothers. It is easy to read newspaper and magazine articles, television and radio programs, and advice literature for their collapsing of parenthood and motherhood and for their default assumption that mothers were the managers of their households. It is more interesting, however, to consider what had in fact shifted over the course of the 1980s. These sources point to new notions about fatherhood as well as to new ideas about working motherhood. In particular, they make clear that the working mother—a vilified figure in the postwar period—was by the 1990s no longer exclusively suspect. Indeed, working motherhood took on a glossy, aspirational air even as it continued to be associated with guilt and increasingly also with stress and overwork. In the 1990s, the dual-income household represented by professional working mothers and working fathers, both engaged in the lives of their families, replaced the male-breadwinner family as the predominate vision of the successful middle-class family.

### SUCCESS STORIES

In the 1990s, the success story became a pervasive way of addressing the phenomenon of working parenthood everywhere from women's magazines and newspaper articles to government and corporate manuals. Featuring individuals' stories of navigating day-to-day life as working parents—at times in their own words—lent commentators an easy air of credibility as they addressed Britons' everyday realities. Most often, these success stories suggested that workable solutions to combining work and family life were possible with enough effort and imagination. The true promise of working parenthood, however, varied widely. The popularity of working parent success stories is therefore a testament to the genre's political and cultural flexibility.

In some instances, the working parent success stories that appeared in the British media spoke to 1970s feminism's most expansive ideals. In the late 1980s and in the 1990s, job-sharing couples were frequently featured in the press in spite of the fact that they represented a small minority of all job



sharers and despite the tiny numbers of total job sharers in the labor market. Stories about pairs of lecturers, vicars, social workers, police officers, and others who had worked together to find a way to remain in paid work and to share the work of childrearing at home posited a vision of egalitarian, genderless households where children were raised equally by both parents and where no parent would have to experience routine alienation from the other's day-to-day life.<sup>14</sup> These highly favorable accounts delivered on the original promise of working parenthood to liberate women to participate fully in professional life and to see men assume a greater share of household and childrearing responsibilities.

Meanwhile, in the success stories that proliferated in British media in the 1990s, the promise of working parenthood was often couched in assurances that the dual-income household would not upend traditional gender norms. When *Practical Parenting* magazine published its excerpt from the Department of Health's *Working Parents Survival Handbook*, six photos accompanied the piece (figures 5.1–5.3). Five of these depicted women working, caring for small children, or both. The mothers shown were slender, smiling, white, and middle-class professionals. They appeared alongside computers, taking calls, and dressed and made up for a day at the office. Their children, too, were smiling, well groomed, and manifestly well cared for.

The images suggested the possibility of a frictionless world in which middle-class mothers, now working, nonetheless displayed the competence, ease, and attractiveness of the housewife. Just one image included a father in a scene featuring a family of four enjoying a leisurely breakfast in matching bathrobes. Though certainly a less central part of the picture, the working father, too, was a jovial participant in the life of home and family. The accompanying piece urged readers to believe that professional fulfillment, happy children, and the evident material success of two household incomes were possible without risking traditionally feminine success and a conventional family life. Whether or not working parenthood was portrayed as a challenge to traditional gender norms, success stories told of couples achieving household harmony.

As much as working parent success stories addressed working parenthood's ability to deliver both emotional and material fulfillment, they also acknowledged the immense strain confronting working families. For every account of elegantly resolving the tensions of work and home life came one

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**At-a-glance guide**

Making your decision .....	page 76
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Childcare at a glance .....	page 82

EXTRACT FROM WORKING PARENTS: SURVIVAL HANDBOOK BY LEE ROOSELL AND MARY TOYMAN (HEALTH EDUCATION AUTHORITY) (E 95)

FIGURE 5.1

We Can Work It Out. Courtesy of The Women's Library.

that emphasized accumulated fatigue and stress. In this respect, the 1990s saw the exaggeration of an existing tendency in representations of working parents. Since the late 1970s, when the notion of working parenthood was first elaborated in feminist circles, working parents were portrayed both as hopeful and frustrated figures, burdened with significant responsibility and inadequate support. In the 1990s, the pitfalls of aiming to have it all were dramatized on a new scale. Helen McCarthy has suggested that during the 1980s and 1990s, a new pessimism emerged in popular culture about the possibilities of combining a satisfying professional and family life for



FIGURE 5.2  
Taking Calls. Courtesy of The Women's Library.



FIGURE 5.3  
Family Breakfast. Courtesy of The Women's Library.

women.<sup>15</sup> Yet the 1990s also saw renewed excitement about the promise of combining paid work with family. Working parents were depicted both as hollowed out and exhausted and as highly accomplished middle-class success stories.

More often than not, these accounts were one and the same. Jenny Ireland, mother of two-year-old Charlie, was featured in a piece entitled "Mums at Work" in *Our Baby* magazine as evidence that "it is possible to combine working life with being a parent and enjoy the two!" She nonetheless told readers of Charlie's experience at nursery, "We're happy with the arrangement, although part of me does worry about him, especially on the odd days when he cries as I leave." She concluded her commentary by noting that "working full time and having a young child is very demanding and tiring."<sup>16</sup> In other forums, talk of stress, fatigue, and guilt were given far freer rein. Staged discussions of working motherhood on radio and television gave voice to debilitating guilt, exhaustion, and depression as much as they did stories of professional fulfillment and lives enriched by numerous pursuits.<sup>17</sup>

Working parent success stories, then, were also accounts of efforts to triumph over the emotional burdens of working parenthood. In the 1990s, popular representations of working mothers routinely addressed the issue of guilt. Since John Bowlby's famous 1953 claim that children deprived of maternal attention would suffer lasting damage, working mothers had been frequent objects of public derision.<sup>18</sup> As late as 1979, it had been possible for Patrick Jenkin, the Secretary of State for Social Services in Margaret Thatcher's first government, to speak out aggressively against working mothers on a BBC2 *Man Alive* program entitled "Working Mothers: Should They? Can They?" According to Jenkin, "if the good Lord had intended us to all have equal rights to go out to work, he really wouldn't have created man and woman . . . these are the biological facts of life."<sup>19</sup>

In the 1990s, beliefs like Jenkin's continued to circulate in popular culture, but they were joined by new, more positive perspectives on mothers in paid work. Countless newspaper articles, magazine stories, television programs, and self-help books emphasized that women could combine paid work with parenting and challenged the long-standing narrative that mothers who worked should necessarily feel guilty for being away from their children.<sup>20</sup> Eileen Gillibrand and Jenny Mosley's 1997 guide to "sanity

and survival” for working mothers addressed the issue in its title—*When I Go to Work I Feel Guilty*. The foreword, by Anita Roddick—the founder and CEO of The Body Shop and a working mother—stated plainly, “Let’s banish the guilt. The new mantra to be heard is celebrate yourself as a working mother, and others will do so too.”<sup>21</sup> To be a successful working mother implied cultivating the emotional fortitude to overcome outdated social expectations.

If this was principally an issue for working mothers, it was no longer exclusively so. A 1992 episode of the ITV talk show *The Time, The Place* raised the question “Can women really have it all and not feel guilty?” Although the vast majority of the discussion focused, as promised, on women, midway through the episode, host Mike Scott chimed in to say that as a father he, too, at times felt guilty leaving his kids when he went off to work.<sup>22</sup> Men’s experiences of strain as working parents were most often framed not around guilt but around stress. In the mid-1990s, stress became a fashionable topic in the mass media as well as in discussions of labor in Britain.<sup>23</sup> According to a 1997 piece in *People Management* magazine, there was an epidemic of stress in British society.<sup>24</sup> Commentators suggested that working fathers, like working mothers, were now faced with new psychological burdens.<sup>25</sup> Succeeding at working parenthood would require that they, too, overcome emotional challenges.

#### IT’S ALL IN THE BALANCE

In advice and self-help literature, accounts of men and women navigating their lives—both the good and the bad—helped shape an image of what was possible and what working parents could and should expect of themselves and their families. If having it all despite the evident obstacles was the goal and promise of working parenthood, then finding and maintaining balance was the means to this end. More than any other concept, it was the notion of “work–life balance” and the relaxed ease that it connoted that came to define the figure of the working parent in popular culture in this period. In the 1990s, balance became so integral a part of the discourse about working parenthood that it came to mean a number of different things. To be a balanced working parent meant keeping paid work in perspective and avoiding biting off more than you could chew. It also meant striking an emotional balance within oneself and within a family—expecting neither too much nor too little.<sup>26</sup> While it was generally working

mothers who were portrayed as ultimately responsible for achieving balance in their households, fathers too were expected to concern themselves with the problem of balance.

Several factors contributed to the new association between working parents and the pursuit of balance in the 1990s. The notion of seeking balance was popularized alongside the mounting discourse about stress and the rise of relaxation practices for both men and women in Britain in the postwar period.<sup>27</sup> By the 1990s, the labor of middle-class men and women alike was firmly associated with the need to actively practice relaxation to achieve a balanced state of being. While notions about the importance of relaxation and balance for individual well-being had support among the feminist activists who had helped to popularize the figure of the working parent in the 1980s, these activists, as we have seen, had also advocated for balanced organizations. Companies were supposed to facilitate the possibility of balanced lives for their employees through new forms of support, and they could expect to lose employees if they did not “get that balance right.”<sup>28</sup> In other words, for feminists, balance was not imagined as the sole responsibility of individuals but as something that they could pursue within particular social, cultural, and professional contexts conducive to it. In the cultural representations of working parenthood that proliferated in the 1990s, however, it was predominately individuals and families who bore the responsibility for achieving balance.

As private employers began to address the figure of the working parent in personnel materials, internal publications, and advice literature beginning in the mid-1980s, they lauded the benefits of rigorously well-managed and balanced lives. In working parent success stories, balance became the key measure of a working parent’s success even when it was acknowledged that structures of employment played an important role in shaping the possibilities for families. In August 1994, Sainsbury’s *The Magazine* released the results of a survey conducted in partnership with the charity Exploring Parenthood of fourteen thousand working Britons in an article entitled “It’s All in the Balance.”<sup>29</sup> After briefly recounting the survey results, the piece went on to document the stories of “three couples who seem to be getting the balance right.” What this amounted to, in practice, was a joint commitment to planning, collaboration, personal flexibility in adapting schedules and plans, and sheer force of will. In the words of parents Susan and Martin Singleton—a solicitor and teacher, respectively—the determination

to “achieve a better balance” and being “willing and keen that everything works” were instrumental to their ability to manage their lives. So too, *The Magazine* was prepared to acknowledge, was the nature of paid employment. According to the author of the article, Adrienne Katz, “enlightened employers have realized that their staff are their greatest asset.” Of the six well-balanced men and women featured in the piece, all but one worked either for themselves or for a big employer with notoriously good benefits. All were white, and just one was employed in a low-wage job.

It is no coincidence that it was through the language of balance that the concerns of working parents were most actively popularized in Britain in the 1990s. Emphasizing the problem of balance shifted the focus from the needs of working parents—a group still strongly associated with women, and indeed with feminism—to issues of lifestyle generally. This did not, as it might have done, facilitate a conversation about the experiences of non-white and working-class Britons who had long combined paid work with parenting. Through the association between working parents and balance, the particular concerns of the working parent became further detached from the politicized issue of gender equality and from questions of identity more generally. Tellingly, just four of the six men and women featured in Katz’s piece on balance for Sainsbury’s were parents. Balance was now a concern for all Britons.

If the concerns of the working parent were no longer so specific, they were nonetheless pressing. In the mid-1990s, working mothers and fathers were expected to resolve, and indeed to want to resolve, the tensions between their working and personal lives through devoted effort. They were also expected to do so together. Although advice literature for working parents did at times address the particular challenges confronting single parents in Britain in the 1990s, marital relationships tended to figure at the center of accounts of achieving balance. The Department of Health’s *Working Parents Survival Handbook* indicated that it was the responsibility of both partners to juggle responsibilities and implied that sharing household work was necessary as well as appropriate. Readers were informed that finding dependable childcare, negotiating work schedules, prioritizing commitments, and managing crises were challenging but manageable tasks made the more so by emerging forms of employer and state support.

Moreover, they were tasks that could be managed without emotional friction at home. The handbook told readers that “many people look for

partners who, as well as enjoying an emotionally intimate relationship, will be supportive of their career or work roles and share the tasks involved with home and parenting.”<sup>30</sup> Working parents could not only be optimistic about negotiating work and parenthood, the handbook suggested, but they could also hope for an intimate and egalitarian marriage. The challenges and possibilities of marital relationships, balanced or unbalanced, formed the backdrop against which the prospects of working parents were nearly always imagined. As much as midcentury middle-class familial life had been measured against the image of the male-breadwinner family, by the 1990s, middle-class success was frequently judged against the model of the dual-income household.

#### GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

This by no means meant that expectations had converged for women and men by the 1990s. If successful working parenthood required successful partnership, it was nonetheless ultimately a matter of women’s organization, direction, and commitment. Gillibrand and Mosley’s *When I Go to Work I Feel Guilty* was typical in advising women to be ruthlessly efficient and organized household managers and to make time for everyone and everything. Mothers were expected to master the available forms of support for working parents, however spotty, to achieve at work and at home; to direct their families to participate in making it work; and to do it all with an even temper, an attractive appearance, and a smile.

The pressure on mothers to look the part of traditional feminine success remained profound. A section on “Your Appearance” in *When I Go to Work I Feel Guilty* advised readers that “if you give out a message that you do not care about yourself by wearing frumpy clothes, clashing colours or scuffed shoes, then it is likely that other people will feel the same way about you.” This was followed by a flow chart asking readers to rate their self-presentation in a number of categories across the range from “spot on” to “letting me down.” It drew attention to whether the reader’s nails were “cleaned, filed, varnished,” enquired as to whether they had updated their make-up and hairstyle in the last few years, and asked them to consider the style, age, and quality of their clothes.<sup>31</sup> The section stopped short of urging women to evaluate their bodies themselves for flaws, but other texts that homed in on the need for eating well and exercising hinted strongly in this direction.<sup>32</sup> The implication was clear: looking good mattered for the



working mother. In *When I Go to Work I Feel Guilty* and elsewhere, the paid work of working mothers was portrayed as inseparable from their affective labor. Women were expected to maintain the same affect with their families and with their colleagues as they multitasked and assumed ever more responsibilities.

The representation of working mothers as successful workers and family members in British popular culture helped to shape an impossible new standard of success. To the extent that old expectations that mothers would stay at home with their children shifted in the 1990s, they were simply replaced by new ones. At their most progressive, commentators sometimes acknowledged that whether or not to work for pay was far from a real choice for most mothers.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, a mother picking up a women's magazine or newspaper in the 1990s would likely have found there was little consensus on the issue of whether she was expected to want to stay home with her small children. At the same time, she was now expected to want to work and to contribute equally to her household's income. For the first time, in the 1990s, an altogether new possibility emerged; middle-class women might also feel guilty for choosing not to work for pay.<sup>34</sup> The portrayal of working motherhood in the British media in this decade suggested nearly limitless conflicting expectations for women. One certainty underlying all of them was the reality of more labor, both physical and psychic, in the pursuit of doing it all.

In the mid-1990s calls to recognize fathers as the other half of the "working parent" gained currency in the media. New efforts on the part of feminist charities to highlight working fathers as such entered into a lively and diverse conversation about men's social and gendered roles in these years. In the 1990s, commentators reckoned with the impression that something important had happened to men and to masculinity in the aftermath of second-wave feminism and the transformation of Britain's economy in the 1980s. Journalists published accounts of men's changing experiences of full-time paid work—including long hours culture—while also drawing attention to the experiences of men who worked part time or stayed home as "househusbands."<sup>35</sup> The question of men's agency and choice in the matter of how, when, and where to work versus the reality of higher levels of male unemployment and a changing economy was frequently at the heart of this reporting.<sup>36</sup>

Press coverage of fatherhood in the 1990s developed these broader themes about men's roles and raised fundamental questions about the very purpose of men as parents. In a world in which men were often no longer sole or even primary breadwinners, and where women continued to do a disproportionate share of household work, commentators wondered, in journalist Yvonne Roberts's words, "exactly what, in the 90s, is a father for?"<sup>37</sup> Questions about the relevance of fatherhood were given further life by media interest in the rise of a father's lobby for divorce law reform that aimed to secure equal custody rights for fathers.<sup>38</sup> The rise of a father's rights movement also introduced right-wing voices to the conversation about men's social roles, including ones that condemned feminism for stripping men of their status.

Despite the emergence of new questions about the relevance of fathers as parents, in the 1990s commentators assumed to an unprecedented degree that fathers wanted, and expected, to be involved parents and partners. In this regard, what Laura King has described as the "family-oriented masculinity" of the postwar period was accentuated in these years.<sup>39</sup> A picture of working fathers as involved parents, loving and attentive husbands, and emotionally intelligent communicators became a fixture of an emerging genre of advice literature for fathers. In 1999, Bounty—a promotions company and parenting club whose advice literature and product samples continue to be distributed on National Health Service maternity wards to this day—introduced a guide for fathers for the first time.<sup>40</sup> The Bounty guide began by congratulating new fathers on their success: "You are a hero! You're going to be a dad."<sup>41</sup> If working mothers faced an uphill battle to be seen as good parents, not so fathers. Bounty advised dads to be present at every step of new parenthood. It encouraged readers to recognize what they stood to gain from close relationships with children and urged them to think about baby care not as a chore but "also an opportunity." It also urged fathers to take care of their relationships with their partners. This meant, for instance, keeping in touch with them during work hours and coming home when planned.

The "Bounty Guide to Fatherhood" also addressed fathers specifically as working parents. According to the guide, being present for and engaging with the reality of a new family member required dads to rethink their relationship to work. In the words of one contributor, "when you become

a dad, you are taking on a second job. It's a little like moonlighting. So the trick is often to cut as many corners as possible on the first money-earning job without being sacked."<sup>42</sup> This was striking advice given the ongoing assumption that men would be driven and successful at work and support their families financially. The guide went on to talk extensively about stress, noting that "the stress of combining job and fathering is hard." The guide also encouraged men to expect that their partners would want to contribute to the household income: "If you're both committed to sharing time with the children, it's likely your partner will want to share the breadwinning." It nonetheless imagined men as primary earners—and, as it turned out, primary rational thinkers—in families. Bounty suggested that "if she earns less than you, encourage her to train for better work. This should help your relationship." Being a good working father, in short, required renegotiating paid work and directing a household economy that would enable both parents to care for their children.

The new expectations for working fathers that circulated widely in the 1990s meant that men, too, were now assumed to be subject to the kinds of conflicts between work and family life that had long plagued women, even if the specific challenges and rewards of managing this tension were different. In a 1994 piece entitled "Daddy Stress" in *Child* magazine, James Levine acknowledged that women continued to bear primary responsibility for households and children.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, he suggested that men, too, were "increasingly torn between two sets of expectations—yesterday's view that a husband should bring home the bacon while his wife raises the children, and today's wisdom that he should share in the childrearing while being a major breadwinner, too." Levine went on to insist that the "expectation that dad will be more involved is the standard that today's parents aim for." In short, Levine argued, fathers, like mothers, were now subject to new pressures to do it all. This came both with the potential rewards of an enriching life at work and at home and with new pressures to perform, indeed to labor, all of the time.

## BACKLASH

Representations of working parents in British popular culture in the 1990s reflected more than a decade of change in social norms for working women and men. While depictions of working mothers and working fathers emphasized the tremendous costs of trying to do and have it all, they also

rendered the working parent, and the working couple, aspirational figures for the first time. Success stories that emphasized the highlights, but also the trials and tribulations of working parenthood, shaped a new norm of the middle-class dual-income household. By the 1990s, images of working parents and dual-income households—at once having it all and struggling to get the balance right—rivaled the iconography of the traditional male-breadwinner family in British popular culture.

The rapid rise to cultural prominence of the working parent and the displacement of the male-breadwinner family did not go uncontested. In 1990, a group of professional middle-class mothers founded the organization Full Time Mothers.<sup>44</sup> According to the group, the organization came about due to concern “about the relentless drive to get all mothers into paid employment outside the home and all children into third party child-care.”<sup>45</sup> On the one hand, Full Time Mothers reflected the long shadow of Bowlby—its spokeswomen argued that small children needed their mothers as primary caregivers, and they promulgated a conservative and largely fictional vision of traditional British family life. Full Time Mothers also made an economic argument, however. The organization called for the end of a dual-income society and a return to a single breadwinner model where women were subsidized to remain at home—at least for the first three years of a child’s life.<sup>46</sup> A decade after the organization’s founding, chairman Jill Kirby, a former city lawyer and stay-at-home mother, continued to speak out against an economic reality in which “everyone has to feed a pension.”<sup>47</sup> Implicit in the emergence of Full Time Mothers was a reaction against the new icons of smiling, professional working mothers that appeared in the media and in advice literature and against the attendant pressures on mothers to do it all.<sup>48</sup> While there was no exact parallel backlash among men to the rise of working fathers in British culture, we can perhaps see in the right-wing father’s rights movement a similar effort to wrest back control over shifting notions of masculine and feminine roles in the family and in society.<sup>49</sup>

In the 1990s, working parenthood became associated with middle-class success—particularly, but not exclusively, for women. Despite pushback from organizations such as Full Time Mothers, working motherhood as it was embodied in glossy women’s magazines, advice literature, and journalistic accounts of job-sharing couples shed much of its postwar stigma. Working fatherhood, meanwhile, took on real meaning for the first time as

commentators elaborated the virtues, joys, and struggles of men who chose to combine active fathering with paid work.

## II. SURVIVING WORKING PARENTHOOD IN PRACTICE

By the 1990s, Britons were confronted with gloomy as much as encouraging representations of working parenthood. If Full Time Mothers pushed back against working parenthood in part because of the daunting realities it seemed to represent, other Britons came to identify as working parents for precisely this reason. Women and men who entered the paid workplace for the first time in the 1980s did so with new expectations about their ability to combine work with family life. As Lucy Daniels, the founder of PAW, remembers of these years, “we all thought that the equal opportunities movement was done and dusted in the late 70s, and then we found that actually things were still really tough.”<sup>50</sup> It was not only feminist activists such as Daniels who went on to spend their careers addressing the challenges of working parenthood who experienced a sense of strain and frustration in the face of the slow pace of change. Women and men like the Wilsons who wrote to the WMA about their lives as working parents in the early 1990s understood their own experiences in light of what they saw represented in popular culture, and reported feeling exhausted and overwhelmed. By capturing everyday experiences of intensified working lives, work-family tensions, and conflicting gender norms, the depictions of working parenthood that circulated in the British media in the 1990s spoke to growing numbers of ordinary Britons.

In the 1990s, British parents faced ever more intense working lives, both in the paid workplace and at home. In the absence of comprehensive state support for working families, the growing burden of paid labor confronting British parents—and in particular the changing realities for white middle-class women—represented new challenges to be managed by individual households. In practice, the division of labor between men and women shifted little in these years, and mothers continued to bear primary responsibility for combining paid work with childrearing and resolving the tensions that arose in their households. That growing numbers of Britons—including some working as well as middle-class women and men—gave voice to their struggles in the now familiar language of working parenthood reflects the degree to which the cultural icon of the working

parent spoke to everyday experiences of stress, fatigue, guilt, and strain by the 1990s.

### PARENTS AT WORK

Over the course of the 1980s, the number of women who returned to paid work within nine months of having a baby in Britain almost doubled. In 1989, 60 percent of mothers who lived with a partner were in paid work.<sup>51</sup> The number of mothers in the workforce only continued to increase in the 1990s. By 2000, nearly 70 percent of two-parent households had two wage-earning members, and the number of two-parent single breadwinner households in Britain had declined precipitously. Although there was a substantial increase in full-time employment for mothers—from 17 to 21 percent during the 1980s, most working mothers worked part time.<sup>52</sup> The experiences of white and black mothers, and coupled and single mothers, in the labor market differed, and it was predominately the relationship of white cohabiting mothers to paid work that changed throughout the 1980s. In 1981, 54 percent of black mothers were in paid employment, and this remained largely unchanged across the decade. Although as many white as black mothers worked by 1989, black mothers remained significantly more likely to work full time. Meanwhile, while single mothers had slightly lower levels of employment by 1989 than had been the case in 1981, at the dawn of the 1990s, 41 percent were employed for pay.<sup>53</sup>

The expanding presence of mothers in the workforce contributed to the increasing paid workload for British households across the 1980s but so too did the relative stability of male employment. In 1994, almost 85 percent of British fathers were in paid work—a figure nearly unchanged from 1984 employment rates.<sup>54</sup> More than half of working fathers in 1994 worked over forty hours per week, with an average of forty-seven hours per week. Fathers as a whole worked an average of four hours per week more than nonfathers. In general, fathers in managerial or professional occupations worked more hours per week than those in manual occupations. White fathers, fathers with no more than two children, fathers living in two-parent households, those with higher education, and those with an employed partner were more likely than other fathers to be in paid work. The burden of unemployment consequently fell particularly heavily on unskilled ethnic minority men. At the same time, between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, fathers employed in nonmanual work became the majority in Britain,

while the proportion of fathers in manual employment dropped from 53 to 46 percent.

While the gap between fathers' and mothers' volume of employment narrowed between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, fathers continued to have the highest level of workforce participation of all working Britons and mothers the lowest—with other men and women in between.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, men and women continued to do different kinds of work for pay. Fathers were significantly more likely than mothers to have managerial or professional jobs and mothers to have semi- or unskilled work. Having children also continued to affect men's and women's working lives very differently as had long been the case. In 1996, a detailed government longitudinal study of the factors influencing Britons' labor market participation found that 17 percent of men surveyed reported that having a child had impacted their working arrangements. The figure for mothers was nearly two-thirds.<sup>56</sup> When asked how they divided up responsibility for working and child-care in their households, those who reported that having children had affected their working lives were most likely to respond that one member of the couple—generally the man—worked while the other looked after the children. In only 10 percent of households surveyed were men primarily responsible for home and children while women were the main breadwinners.<sup>57</sup> Despite the growing number of mothers in the paid workforce, the gendered division of labor remained firmly entrenched.

The conditions of men's work were nonetheless changing in significant ways. Although men's weekly working hours in Britain were not substantially longer in 1994 than they had been a decade previously, they were the longest worked by any men in Europe, and this attracted growing concern.<sup>58</sup> Britain had twice the proportion of workers working more than forty-eight hours per week than any other European Union country as well as more annual lost work time to illness and job stress.<sup>59</sup> British social policy makers and the charitable sector had long looked to Europe as a point of reference for developments at home, and Britain's further integration with Europe from 1992 and the specter of the European Union's progressive social legislation boosted these efforts.

Moreover, with growing numbers of mothers in work, men's long hours were increasingly a problem for middle-income as well as working-class families; nearly everyone was under more pressure. This was a fact that statistics on Britons' weekly work hours could easily miss due to the part-time

nature of much of women's paid work. More revealing were the combined annual hours worked by men and women in Britain. These increased substantially over the 1980s—by seventy hours between 1981 and 1989.<sup>60</sup> By the 1990s, the decline of organized labor compounded the increased burden of paid work on Britons, parents and otherwise. Whereas 53 percent of British workers were union members in 1979, in 1999 only 28 percent of workers were in unions. By the mid-1990s, only 45 percent of Britons' wages were set by collective bargaining—down from a remarkable 70 percent in 1980.<sup>61</sup>

In the 1990s, middle-class mothers joined middle-class fathers and working-class parents of both sexes in paid work because they wanted to and because they had to. Although it is impossible to assess the precise motivations of mothers for remaining in or assuming more paid work, and how these changed over time, it is clear that financial pressure on families to earn increased across the 1980s in the context of a new economic climate of rising housing costs and personal debt and ever dwindling state support for families.<sup>62</sup> In reflecting on her work in the charitable sector in this period, Lucy Daniels recalls a noticeable change in the kinds of inquiries received by PAW:

When we started taking calls from parents about their childcare . . . it was very much about people wanting to go back to work because they had a career they didn't want to turn their back on or they were the main breadwinner in their home or they were a single parent or whatever. But they made a choice. But over the '80s, towards the end of the '80s and early '90s, we got people in tears and really quite distressed because they had to work and they often perhaps didn't want to work, but they felt they were trapped in it because of the housing costs and the mortgages that they'd taken on board.

By the early 1990s, there was a sense that men's and women's work in Britain was out of control. In this context, the reality of more paid work for families was undeniable. In 1992 Chloe Spenser, a hospital receptionist in Teddington, and her husband John Spenser, a hospital technician, wrote to the WMA to nominate their childminder for the organization's Working Mother's Thank You award that honored Britain's growing ranks of private childcare providers. In her letter, Mrs. Spenser put the matter plainly: "Without Rashida I wouldn't be able to work. Without work we wouldn't have a home."<sup>63</sup>

The emerging sense that work was out of control had as much to do with the qualitative experience of the paid working day as it did with the



necessity of work, or of particular work hours, alone. The early 1990s have been characterized as a period of significant work intensification in Britain. The globalization of lean production and its application in organizations ranging from local government and hospitals to banks and multinational corporations meant new demands on employees to produce ever-greater value per day, hour, and even minute.<sup>64</sup> While work intensification was identified across Western Europe and the United States in the 1990s, the highest levels—measured as the subjective experience of having to work very hard, at a high speed, or with tight deadlines—were reported in Britain.<sup>65</sup> National surveys of several thousand Britons of working age show that jobs requiring hard work rose more than 9 percent between 1992 and 1997.<sup>66</sup>

Over the same time period, women's exposure to high strain jobs rose at a faster rate than men's.<sup>67</sup> The pressure to work very hard grew at the fastest rate among women employed full time and was at least as pronounced in public as in private sector jobs. Unsurprisingly, the intensification of paid work had corresponding negative consequences for well-being; the proportion of Britons who were very or completely satisfied with their jobs fell nearly 9 percent between 1992 and 2001.<sup>68</sup> The intensification of labor regimes has been linked to declining mental and physical health alike in this period, including the erosion of sleep time.<sup>69</sup> That individuals with higher qualification levels were particularly likely to report work intensification points to the new forms of stress on middle-class families in the 1990s.

#### PARENTS AT HOME

Matters at home were not any easier for British families in the 1990s. The rise of the working parent in popular culture in the 1990s was not accompanied by a radical transformation of the gendered division of labor at home, nor was it met with a reduction in the burden of household work for families. Indeed, the domestic lives of British parents, and in particular mothers, became more intense in these years. The balance of household labor performed by men and women did shift across the period we have considered, but this was largely the result of women spending somewhat less time on domestic work rather than men doing significantly more. In Britain, as elsewhere in the West, as women assumed more paid work outside of the home, they did less domestic work. British women spent an

average of forty minutes less on housework per day in 1985 than they had in 1975. Between 1985 and 2005, the amount of time that women spent on housework increased slightly from this low but remained below 1975 levels. Meanwhile, men assumed a greater share of domestic work than had previously been the case. Between 1965 and 2003, men's participation in domestic labor grew by 50 percent, though much of this increase happened before 1980 with the rise of family-oriented masculinity.<sup>70</sup>

It was therefore the case that British women continued to do a disproportionate share of household labor. A 2002 study showed that while male and female partners agreed that the women surveyed did more household work than their male partners, they disagreed about the extent of the difference. According to British men, their partners did twice as many hours of household work as they did, but according to the women, the difference was in the order of two-and-a-half times as many hours.<sup>71</sup> In 1994, Exploring Parenthood's survey of 14,000 Britons reported that although 71 percent of the mothers surveyed were in paid work, just 12 percent of the fathers surveyed were involved in organizing childcare. Nearly three-quarters of women with a partner who were surveyed reported doing most of the housework. Just a quarter of male respondents indicated that they shared the housework equally with their partners.<sup>72</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly given the extent of Britons' workforce participation, the combined time that men and women dedicated to domestic work in Britain fell by an average of just thirteen minutes between 1971 and 2000.<sup>73</sup> Of course, families with children had higher total hours of domestic work than those without.<sup>74</sup> Exploring Parenthood's 1994 study found that three-quarters of those surveyed reported having meals together as a family most days of the week, 91 percent reported having spoken to a relative not living with them in the past week, and 81 percent reported going on holiday as a family at least once per year. Lone parents were unsurprisingly under greater financial and time pressures, but their attitudes about the importance of "quality time" spent with family largely coincided with those of partnered parents.<sup>75</sup> Despite the changing realities of daily life for British families, parents continued to place high social value on time-intensive norms such as mealtimes together and active care for extended families.

A number of studies suggest that despite the relative stagnation of total domestic work hours in the last third of the twentieth century, the way in which men and women spent this time changed dramatically, in ways

that made time spent at home more structured. By the 1990s, both women and men appeared to be spending proportionally more time on childcare, and perhaps even more total time with children, despite their growing paid workload.<sup>76</sup> In part this was a result of the fact that men's increasing involvement in domestic labor was concentrated largely around childcare and decisions about children rather than routine housework tasks such as cooking and cleaning.<sup>77</sup> The Exploring Parenthood study found that two-thirds of fathers reported spending an average of between one and three hours a day with their children, with a fifth of respondents reporting that they spent four or more hours. Nonetheless, most of the men surveyed indicated that they felt they did not have enough time to spend with their children.<sup>78</sup>

The moderate shift in the gendered division of labor at home in the late twentieth century was tied in part to new economic realities for British families. Based on a comparison of men's involvement in domestic labor in Britain and France at the turn of the century, the sociologist Rosemary Compton concluded that "men in Britain and the US . . . have been constrained to offer more domestic support to their employed partners given the lack of external supports for dual income families."<sup>79</sup> Because couples in France could fall back on state childcare, there had been less impetus, she hypothesized, for men to assume a greater role in the household. In short, Compton concluded, British men had been "in a sense 'forced' into domesticity to enable their partners to work."<sup>80</sup> Care work was a social necessity, and the question was simply who would provide it. It remained largely women. It was also, increasingly, the private market.

The growing involvement of men in childcare, and the overall increase in the time parents spent with their children by the 1990s, reflected shifting attitudes about the role of the state in family life, about men's and women's roles, and about the role of parent. Despite the persistence of a highly unequal gendered division of labor, a large study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council on employment and the family in 2002 found that just 18 percent of Britons surveyed agreed with the statement "a man's job is to earn money, a woman's job is to look after the family."<sup>81</sup> Shifting family structures and marital patterns seem to have played a role in reshaping traditional attitudes toward household work in this period. There is some evidence that men living with, but not married to, their partners did a greater share of household work than their married

counterparts. So too did men who had lived with their partner before marriage. Men with higher levels of education also tended to be more involved in domestic labor.<sup>82</sup>

New ideals of education and parenting that took shape beginning in the 1950s and 1960s may also have played a role in the growing proportion of time that parents dedicated to childcare by the 1990s. From the late 1970s onward, the work of Penelope Leach, the British parenting expert dubbed the “Dr Spock of her generation,” gave renewed impetus to the ideal of child-centric parenting.<sup>83</sup> While this book has not dealt extensively with parent–child relationships, the parenting advice of this period told parents that their role was paramount to their children’s happiness and success and advocated a highly involved, active, and consequently labor-intensive style of parenting.<sup>84</sup> If this was advice directed foremost at mothers, it also, and perhaps increasingly, reached fathers.

The poet and novelist Blake Morrison claimed to channel popular ambivalence about Leach in a piece for *The Independent* in 1994: “She makes parenthood seem hard work: she makes us worry that there’s more we could be doing for our children; she makes us anxious and neurotic. But above all, she makes us feel guilty.” He went on to say that “what we resent is not that she’s occasionally wrong, but that she’s mostly right: our priorities are wrong, but we don’t know how to change them while also remaining active, wage-earning, employed. For Leach, bringing up children is at least as important as any profession, and requires that those who pursue it do so with their concentration fully engaged.”<sup>85</sup> Across the 1980s, childrearing continued its mid-twentieth-century trajectory in assuming an ever more important cultural status, even becoming a status symbol, at precisely the moment when middle-class mothers’ entry into paid work strained British family life.

Despite the stagnation in hours spent on household work between the mid-1980s and the turn of the century, there is reason to suspect that women and men alike experienced an intensification of their domestic lives over this period. The persistent social value of time spent together as a family, the new importance ascribed to intensive childrearing, and the reality that a majority of mothers were now managing household responsibilities on top of paid work seems to have endowed middle-class British homes with the same sense of mounting regimentation and logistical demands that the sociologist Arlie Hochschild identified in American households in this

period for much the same reasons.<sup>86</sup> In the 1990s, the home as much as the workplace became a site of new anxieties for men as well as for women—as growing popular interest in the issue of men’s stress suggests. Moreover, the now widespread popular discourse about work–life balance lacked an imaginary of selfhood or community beyond the realms of work or home. This reflected the loss of a feminist vision that support for working parents might liberate both women and men to live fuller and more equal lives.

Amid new standards and expectations of working mothers and fathers, the intensified working lives of British parents in the 1990s came at a tremendous psychic cost. On a 1989 episode of *Woman’s Hour* featuring the author of the recently published *Working Mother’s Survival Guide*, a group of mothers discussed their experiences of managing paid work alongside motherhood. While the tone of the discussion was lighthearted, and featured humorous references to hopelessly incompetent husbands and professional clothing smeared with baby food, the underlying accounts of strain were far from it. One mother commented that she’d recently found herself wailing on the stairs of her house and concluded that “I tend to think I’m more of a failure at home than at work.”<sup>87</sup> In her sense of failing to meet the many demands on her, she was far from alone. A decade later, in 2001, another episode of *Woman’s Hour* again interviewed working mothers about their experiences of paid work. For one mother, who had worked full time when her son was little but had since given this up, the guilt she’d experienced had been overwhelming. She’d found herself crying on the way to work and miserable when she got home in the evening to find that she was too tired to play with her son. She’d ended up taking antidepressants to cope.<sup>88</sup>

Three-quarters of working parents surveyed by Exploring Parenthood in 1994 indicated that they found it difficult to fulfill their commitments to both home and work. When asked to describe their feelings as parents, the most common response of 58 percent of respondents was “joyful,” though this was trailed closely—at 55 percent—by “anxious.”<sup>89</sup> Mothers who worked reported not having enough time for their families and those who didn’t reported not having enough money. Parents cited financial concerns, working hours, their partner’s working hours, lack of childcare, and lack of time together as a couple as their major sources of concern.<sup>90</sup> Some mothers also mentioned the “lack of status society gives to full-time mothers” as a cause of anxiety. Many parents reported a sense of unpreparedness

for the challenges of parenthood. Some 64 percent of respondents said that they would have welcomed education and training in childrearing. A similarly high number indicated that they had not expected that having children would have such an effect on their relationships and sex lives.<sup>91</sup> What Exploring Parenthood's survey results amounted to was a cry for help. In the summation of one parent, it was the "pressure of combining work, children and self"—or, in other words, everything—that felt so taxing.

#### TRAUMAS OF GUILT, WORRY, DEPRESSION, AND DOWNRIGHT BAD TEMPER

It is little surprise that a growing subset of Britons embraced the language of working parenthood in the 1990s as a way to make sense of the stress and strain that accompanied their everyday lives. When a working parents support group formed in the Glaxo Group Research division of the pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline in the early 1990s, it advertised itself to fellow staff members as follows: "Are you tired, confused, stressed and have just returned to work after having your baby? Would you like to talk to others who are working parents and know what you are feeling?"<sup>92</sup> As had been the case when feminists first came together to organize around the challenges confronting working parents in the 1970s, in the 1990s, stress, overwhelm, and exhaustion continued to bring working parents together. Two decades later, however, an emphasis on self-help and mutual emotional acknowledgment took precedence over calls for political action in workplace parents groups.

Outside of the context of organized working parent groups, the physical and psychic toll of working parenthood was a frequent theme of submission letters to the WMA Working Mother of the Year and Working Mother's Thank You competitions. Letters to the WMA via *SHE* magazine came from women and men from across Britain. Nearly all were middle class or aspirationally middle class, but many were employed in manual and service work.<sup>93</sup> Of the forty-three nominations to the charity's 1992 Working Mother's Helper of the Year award preserved in the archive, nearly a third mention guilt or worry. In July 1992, a hospital librarian in Surrey nominated her "smashing father-in-law, Ken Lasater" for the Working Mother's Thank You award. According to Mrs. Lasater, her father-in-law had been "a rock of noncritical support throughout the inevitable traumas of guilt,

worry, depression and downright bad temper which have accompanied my struggles to be the perfect career woman, mother and wife (not necessarily in that order!)”<sup>94</sup>

Other parents spoke of the guilt that they experienced about working when they hired childcare providers or could not seem to find childcare that met their standards.<sup>95</sup> The letters that working mothers and fathers addressed to the WMA in the 1990s developed the trope of the guilty, stressed, and overburdened working parent that flourished in cultural representations of working parents in these years. In doing so, they crafted stories about beating the odds and overcoming challenges stacked against them. In conversation with organizations like the WMA, which were invested in highlighting the concerns of working parents, ordinary Britons helped develop a narrative of working parenthood as a heroic enterprise, triumphed by the parent—usually a mother—who strived for perfection.

That working parenthood had come to seem like a matter of heroics and survival against the odds to British parents by the 1990s had in large part to do with the sheer exhaustion many faced in isolation from traditional, state, or employment-based sources of support for families. In her letter nominating her mother-in-law for the Working Mother’s Helper award, Tina Conlan—a full-time working mother originally from Northern Ireland and living in West Yorkshire—emphasized the challenges she had experienced raising her children far away from her own immediate family. She told the WMA, “I’ll never forget, just after James was born—I was frightened, tired and hurting my milk had just come in and I felt really low, Mary bathed my breasts with hot flannels to take the pain away it was so caring and so intimate.” She went on to say that “once when things were really bad and I was exhausted, I drove to her home in Lincoln, dumped James into her arms and said—‘I NEED sleep’—I slept all day and she took James out of the house so all would be quiet.”<sup>96</sup> In part, what made the elder Mrs. Conlan’s care so noteworthy from the younger Mrs. Conlan’s perspective was that she was not her own kin. The deeply ingrained notion that working parents could, and ordinarily should, be able to manage family life on their own increased both the practical and psychic burdens that they faced.

The stories that Britons told about themselves for the purposes of the WMA’s competitions revealed the degree to which many had internalized the norms of self-reliance, emotional fortitude, and adaptability associated with the cultural figure of the working parent. In nomination letters, values

like flexibility, which first became associated with the figure of the working parent as part of a feminist struggle for more workplace support for families, perversely became individuated and reframed as key personal attributes of working parents and the individuals who supported them. Countless letters submitted to the WMA's competitions mentioned that it was their child-minder, mother-in-law, husband, or wife's flexibility that enabled family life to function despite the huge challenges.<sup>97</sup> There were also suggestions in the letters addressed to the WMA that Britons had received the message that successful working parents were those who met their responsibilities without appearing in any way to buckle under the pressure. This, too, took on a gender-specific form. In a letter nominating her domestic helper—Norma—who was herself a single working mother of young boys, Jenny Morley in Trowbridge, Wiltshire reported that “despite the financial and emotional pressures of single parenthood, Norma is always bubbling with good humour and energy and even finds the time to look lovely, very trendy and vibrant.”<sup>98</sup> If the ultimate measure of a working mother's success remained her attractive appearance, this was but one of a set of expectations to navigate in a world of work.

### III. EMBRACING THE IDEAL OF WORKING PARENTHOOD

Writing and thinking about their everyday lives through the cultural prism of working parenthood enabled a subset of British mothers and fathers to articulate their struggles and frustrations and to commiserate and seek recognition from others. But it also served another function. As we have seen, by the 1990s, the working parent had become an aspirational as much as harried figure in British popular culture. The stories of working parenthood that proliferated in the British media inspired hope and desire, as much as exhausted self-recognition, in audiences. It was the promise as much as the pitfalls of life as working parent that saw growing numbers of Britons come to speak about themselves and their lives in these terms, and enabled parents to make sense of their decisions to accept growing burdens of work as the price of middle-class success.

In their letters to the WMA in the early 1990s, mothers and fathers wrote about the fact that they needed to do paid work, often referencing the economic context and the early 1990s recession. Just as many, however, spoke about their desire to work and to have interesting careers.<sup>99</sup> In



the 1990s, working parenthood and its persistent association with working motherhood continued to hold out the feminist promise of exciting professional lives for women. As one Scottish mother who had trained as an orthopedic surgeon declared triumphantly, "When my daughter was born most of my (all male) colleagues assumed that this would be the end of my career and that I would never get back to such a demanding job, however, with Kerry's help I've proved them wrong!"<sup>100</sup> If it was sometimes childminders or extended family members who enabled working mothers to pursue demanding careers, as was the case with Kerry, letter writers frequently credited their partners for this support. In their letters to the WMA, Britons embraced the enduring feminist promise of working parenthood—that women could have stimulating professional lives and men could share more equally in the life of families.

At the heart of this hope was a renegotiation of gender roles and of the terms of marriage in the aftermath of second-wave feminism. Mothers who wrote in to the WMA drew attention to the ways in which their husbands had encouraged and supported their career ambitions.<sup>101</sup> They also highlighted the work that their partners did in the home—taking care of children and sometimes also cooking and cleaning.<sup>102</sup> Angela Ansley, a Lancashire mother who ran a private brain injury rehab clinic, nominated her husband Dave—a full-time hospital social worker—for the prize. Angela told the WMA, "My work has always been very important to me. . . . Dave has always accepted that he and I should be equally responsible for ALL childcare and domestic responsibilities."<sup>103</sup> Similarly, the fathers who wrote in to nominate their wives for the charity's award for Working Mother of the Year often emphasized the central and rewarding role that work played in their partners' lives, even while they acknowledged the reality of economic necessity in driving their households' decisions about paid employment.<sup>104</sup>

The letters of parents who wrote in to the WMA reveal the diverse ways in which men and women sought to navigate new gendered expectations. This was reflected first and foremost in the sensitivity letter writers displayed to questions of gender. Nearly all of the letters addressed to the WMA described those nominated for prizes as self-sacrificing. One mother of a two-year-old daughter who worked full time in retail management in Cheltenham told readers that the prospect of returning to her career had seemed insurmountable until her mother-in-law Pat had stepped in. Pat, she went on to report, suffered from crippling arthritis—but this didn't

stop her: "Pat offers help, not for selfish reasons, but because she couldn't bear to see her son and his wife struggling to make ends meet during the recession."<sup>105</sup>

If writers felt that they needed to emphasize the virtue of self-sacrifice when it came to women's roles in their families, they also ascribed the quality of selflessness to the fathers and grandfathers who they nominated for awards. One mother who worked full time in Dorset as the coordinator of a national charity characteristically nominated her husband, David Tyler, for the helper award on the basis of his "unselfish views."<sup>106</sup> Another mother, writing from Norfolk, nominated her husband in almost identical terms due to his qualities of "unselfishness, caring, adaptability, and strength."<sup>107</sup> When emphasizing the selflessness of the men they nominated for the awards, mothers nonetheless made sure to emphasize—often very explicitly—their partner's traditionally masculine attributes. After extolling the virtues of her husband as unselfish during the period in which she had suffered from postpartum depression, the writer from Norfolk informed the WMA that "I still don't believe I was lucky enough to find him, and he's such a masculine man."<sup>108</sup> The letters addressed to the WMA in the early 1990s navigated carefully around the issue of gender in marriage as if to suggest that despite the reconfiguration of paid work, women and men still had distinctive parts to play.

Just as mothers tended to couch their praise for men's involvement in household and family life in assurances about their masculinity, so too did fathers who wrote to the WMA emphasize that their wives' commitment to paid work did not come at the expense of their involvement in the traditionally female realm of the family. As Wilf Farrow wrote about his wife Joy, a mother to three boys and a trading standards inspector, "Despite being very good at her job, and ambitious, she reluctantly turned down a chance of promotion which would have meant full-time working, because it would have unbalanced her role in the family."<sup>109</sup> Joy was absolutely a capable career woman, Mr. Farrow implied, but not to a destabilizing degree.

The notion of "balance" that so centrally defined the successful working parent who navigated different spheres of activity also materialized here as the balance between men and women as the linchpin of the traditional nuclear family unit. Few letters made explicit the frankest of the gender-specific mandates conveyed in the period's advice literature—that women owed it to their husbands to maintain an attractive appearance and men

owed it to their wives to stick around and be present in the home and family. Nonetheless, implicit in the stories that Britons told about themselves in the language of working parenthood was an account of renegotiating the terms of marital life in the face of shifting expectations of men and women and shifting economic realities.

Britons who spoke about themselves as working parents often conveyed great optimism about the possibilities of marriage. This corresponded with the beginning of a gradual decline in what had been rising rates of divorce in Britain since the late 1960s.<sup>110</sup> While many of these parents aspired to share both paid work and the work of the home equally with their partners, few could so in practice. Instead, parents traded in the currency of appreciation. In 1992, a man who described himself as an “Australian male midwife” working in Leicester nominated his wife Ann—a nurse—for the Working Mother of the Year award. According to his letter, “she’s juggled nursing in the brave new world of the National Health Service, keeping a down market House & Gardenish type home spic and span, and loving a man whose ideals overwhelm his common sense often leaving him frustrated and stressed.”<sup>111</sup>

In a number of letters fathers seemed to address themselves directly to the 1970s feminist argument that women’s roles in caring for men could register as one more piece of work at the end of the day. At best, the marital relationships of working parents could feel like deeply enriching and supportive partnerships. According to one father in Lancashire in his nomination for his wife who had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, “We try to work as partners in caring for children, the house, a large garden, two dogs, and four ducks. Alex is learning to admit when it is too much, something I see as a positive development. She has always made tremendous efforts to make time for the two of us and is now making time for herself as well.” He went on to describe the way in which his wife had stepped up to support him in finding his feet, and establishing his own business, when he was made redundant just five months after the birth of their second child.<sup>112</sup>

In the face of new economic burdens on families, it was the promise of just such “balanced” and mutually supportive marital relationships that led some fathers and mothers to identify hopefully with the discourse about working parents. In doing so, they stomached the reality of shrinking leisure time and relentless paid work, domestic work, and self-work as the cost of an emotionally settled, apparently successful middle-class life. As

one father, Nick Hennsley, in London, reflected on his day-to-day, "Sounds grim? Well yes, at times it can be, but, and this is why I am nominating her. Debbie is still full of fun, enjoys a good night out, is wonderful with the children, and, on top of everything else, puts up with me. Somehow, into this life of two full-time jobs (childcare and social work), there is still time to squeeze in Aerobics sessions, computer classes, swimming and the occasional Turkish bath."<sup>113</sup> It was perhaps the very fact that Debbie did "put up with" him that made a life of work bearable for Nick. That "the occasional bath"—with its suggestion of minor, convenient, self-indulgence—featured in a number of nomination letters suggests the narrow parameters of a life outside of labor for working mothers.

Ultimately, the notion that, banded together, marital couples could cope as working parents without further support was illusory. To the extent that mothers and fathers survived working parenthood in these years, it was in large part due to the growth of the market for private childcare in the 1980s and 1990s. This was something that the WMA was keen to highlight through its Working Mother's Thank You award. While some Britons were similarly eager to acknowledge the critical involvement of their child-minders and nannies in caring for their children, as submissions to the competition attest, it remained remarkably easy to downplay the overall significance this work. In the words of one letter writer, "Our busy and exciting life is only possible because of excellent childcare from a qualified daily nanny, but the star is our working mother."<sup>114</sup>

Of the parents—almost without exception mothers—who did nominate childcare providers for the WMA's prizes, it tended to be the recognition that they, too, were often working mothers, and the sense of identification that this engendered, that proved key to acknowledging their work. For some writers, the importance of childcare work and the persistent gendered division of labor at home was crystal clear. As one mother declared, "Behind every successful woman is a successful supportive woman."<sup>115</sup> But even those who singled out the central role of childcare remained inclined to associate this caring work with women and had little to say about class and racial divides between those who employed childcare providers and childcare employees.

Of course, it was only ever a small number of Britons who actively embraced the language of working parenthood to describe their day-to-day lives in the 1990s. The notion of the working parent as it was configured

in popular culture, as much as in workplace policy, was highly classed and racialized. Although it is impossible to know definitively, the vast majority of submissions to the WMA's competitions appear to have come from white Britons. That the notion of working parenthood spoke to a subset of working as well as middle-class Britons is suggestive of the degree to which the dual-income household headed by a happy marital couple had become a marker of economic and social status in the 1990s. While the notion of working parenthood constituted in the media and in policy steered clear of acknowledging the growing numbers of LGBT parents in Britain, it is perhaps little surprise that the right to marry became the focal point of the gay rights movement in these years.<sup>116</sup> In the 1990s, working parenthood remained closely associated with coupled, white middle-class mothers. It also remained closely associated with the question of guilt and, implicit in it, the presumed choice about whether or not to work. The discussions that flourished in the media about whether working mothers should or shouldn't, and did or didn't, feel guilty in these years point to the limits of the notion of working parenthood in capturing all Britons' experiences.

In 1992, ITV's *The Time, The Place* asked working mothers to address whether women could "have it all" and avoid guilt. A variety of women chimed in with their opinions. The first to speak up to encourage women to believe that they could successfully combine work with childrearing was a representative of the WMA. Asked whether she felt guilty working she insisted, "No! And I think it's a con that women should feel guilty." It was not until a black mother spoke up, however, that anyone seriously countered the point. A black mother of a six-month-old who worked full time in insurance told the audience that she did not feel guilty because she knew that going out to work was enabling her to offer her daughter the best possible life. She felt confident that the time she did have to spend with her daughter was "quality time," and she reiterated that it made no sense for her to give up a job that it had taken her years to get. It was only at this point that another white participant leaped in and—looking directly at the black mother—asked "what's more important than your child?" and demanded to know "what mother means to you people."<sup>117</sup> The racism and derision of black parents that persisted in British culture in the 1990s no doubt made it difficult for black parents to envision better lives for themselves and their families through the paradigm of working parenthood, even as black Britons continued to struggle—alongside growing numbers of

white working parents—to support their families financially while caring for their children.<sup>118</sup>

The experiences of single parents in Britain were also in many ways at odds with the rhetoric surrounding working parenthood. In the 1990s, there were more one-parent families in Britain than ever before. While one in eight families were headed by single parents in 1980, by 1992, this number had risen to one in five. As we've seen, the relationship of single parents—90 percent of them women—to the labor market differed from that of married or cohabiting mothers. The “choice” of whether or not to work for pay for these parents was structured and constrained even more dramatically by childcare costs, the availability of state or other benefits and resources, income potential, and housing costs than was the case for two-parent families. Some single parents, particularly those employed for pay, did identify as working parents, and single mothers played an important role in the earliest forms of organizing on behalf of working parents in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Yet, other more long-standing organizations, particularly the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and Her Child (renamed the National Council for One Parent Families in 1973), organized more specifically around the unique burdens confronting single parents and offered what was perhaps a more resonant identity category for these families, even while they engaged with broader feminist calls for gender equality.<sup>119</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Over the 1990s, the figure of the working parent traveled from its feminist roots into mass culture. There it tapped into a zeitgeist rife with anxiety about economic change and changes in the labor market, childrearing, gender roles, and the stability of marriage. In this context, the cultural figure of the successful working parent—financially secure, member of a close-knit marital team, manager of a balanced household, successful worker, loving mother or father—spoke both to Britons' anxieties and to their hopes. In so far as most British parents had less and less choice about whether to work in these years, and given the high costs—both material and psychic—of divorce and single parenthood, the language of working parenthood served as a way for a group of Britons that extended well beyond feminist activist networks to make sense of their everyday lives as well as to express their

aspirations for happier and more equal relationships. This was particularly true for working mothers, who continued to bear the overwhelming burden of combining paid work with the unpaid labor of family and households.

If the making and remaking of working parenthood had the most profound consequences for the lives of women, there is good reason to consider the emergence of working fatherhood alongside the transformation of working motherhood in the 1990s. In a 1987 interview with *Women's Own* magazine, Margaret Thatcher infamously noted that "there's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families." In one sense, Thatcher's assertion was right—the family remained the fundamental organizing unit of capitalism, and in the context of the intentional erosion of public resources during—though not exclusively during—her tenure, families had no choice but to pick up the pieces. Looking not only at the experiences of working mothers but also those of working fathers sheds light on how families did so in practice. Ultimately, the figure of the working parent that gained currency in British popular culture in the 1990s represented a relatively limited reimagination of women's and men's gender roles even as it embraced the possibility, and—in some instances—the necessity, of women's paid work in the new economy. This points more broadly to the limits of second-wave feminism's success in transforming the gendered division of labor even as feminism's language entered the mainstream.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, working parenthood was once again reinvented as it became the victim of its own cultural successes. It was ironically alongside the popularization of the working parent as an identity group that the feminist politics that had initially shaped a vision of working parenthood were further obscured. In the 1990s, as we have seen, it was work–life balance, not equal opportunities or even family friendliness, that became the focus of the popular discourse surrounding working parents. Balance in this context had as much to do with individual choices and lifestyle—the costs of participation in leisure and consumption—as it did with the gendered division of labor. In 2006, a nationwide survey conducted by ICM asked five hundred British teens about their experiences of living with their working parents. A third of the teens reported that their parents were stressed, and nearly half with single parents did so. A majority expressed the wish that their parents worked less, but when asked whether they should do so if it meant having fewer treats and holidays for

the family, they backtracked.<sup>120</sup> While their parents appear to have agreed about the importance of paid work, the BBC reported that by 2006 more than one-fifth of Britons cited work–life balance as the most important consideration for them—above salary—in making career choices.<sup>121</sup> Britons were concerned about the loss of leisure, but they had embraced a language that lacked a real vision of liberation from the day-to-day grind.

Inherent in growing identification with the figure of the working parent among Britons in the 1990s was an uncertainty about how to navigate increasing demands on their time. British fathers, and to an even greater extent mothers, were overworked and overwhelmed. This was not only the case in the paid workplace, as scholarship on the intensification of labor in the 1990s has suggested. It was also true at home, where new notions of successful motherhood, fatherhood, and childrearing, and heightened overall demands on parents' schedules made for increasingly time-poor domestic environments. That the disproportionate burden of domestic labor continued to be borne by women can perhaps help to account for the widening gender gap between women's and men's reported experiences of work intensity in their paid working lives in the 1990s. In the face of the tremendous demands on working mothers and fathers, workplaces became, more than ever, pressing political and ideological—as much as economic—battlegrounds.

The working parent success stories that proliferated in popular culture, including those coauthored by working parents who spoke in their own voices, offered audiences a variety of different takes on the new demand to do it all in the face of diminished leisure time. For the feminists who organized in the WLM in the late 1970s, the notion of a working parent represented the possibility of a world in which women and men could share more equally in all aspects of productive and reproductive life. The rise of a do-it-all culture that told women and indeed men not just that they could but that they also had to was an unforeseen consequence of a decade of compromise with neoliberal interests in women's labor.





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The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in ITC Stone Serif Std and ITC Stone Sans Std by New Best-set Typesetters Ltd.

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Stoller, Sarah E., author.

Title: Inventing the working parent : work, gender, and feminism in neoliberal Britain / Sarah E. Stoller.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022036853 (print) | LCCN 2022036854 (ebook) | ISBN 9780262546102 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262375061 (epub) | ISBN 9780262375078 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Parenting—Great Britain. | Children of working parents—Great Britain. | Neoliberalism—Great Britain.

Classification: LCC HQ755.8 .S758 2023 (print) | LCC HQ755.8 (ebook) | DDC 306.8740941—dc23/eng/20221221

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022036853>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022036854>

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